

The Eternal Oyster

By LAUREN GRILLI

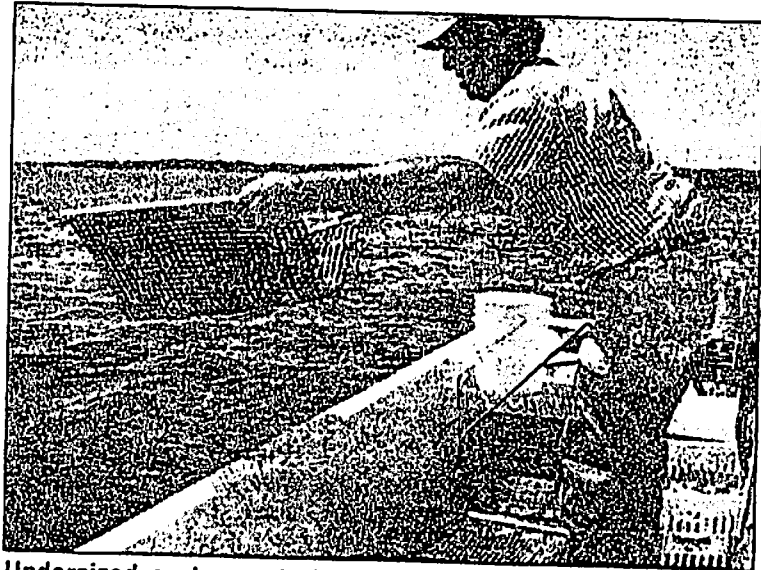
Of the many types of shellfish, oysters are the ones with the reputation and history. While many associate them with the almighty pearl, the four-leaf clover of the bay, jewelry is far from the minds of those who harvest them. To those at Duxbury's Island Creek Oysters, the perfect oyster is not the biggest, nor is it one containing a pearl, but rather, it is one that has a three-inch-long, gently domed shell. The tender meat inside is the prize.

"Most people miss the real sweet taste of the oyster because they just slurp them down," said Bill Bennett of Island Creek Oysters. "They're salty at first, but when you actually chew the oyster, that's when the sweet taste comes out."

An oyster has practical uses, too. The Native Americans and Pilgrims in New England used the finely crushed shells of oysters as mortar for the bricks of their houses, including Duxbury's own John Alden house.



Bill Bennett checks the oysters in his crates. Each crate holds 6 bags and each bag holds 1,000 small oysters.



Undersized oysters gets tossed over the side of the boat to continue growing.

More romantically, it was the shell on which Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, gave birth to Eros – and the word "aphrodisiac." The Italian inamorato Casanova swore by the shellfish, reportedly devouring 50 at the breakfast table and even more in the bedroom.

Two hundred years ago, oysters were as common as barnacles and considered a poor man's food. But like many natural commodities, the beds were soon depleted from over-harvesting, thus creating today's market. In current times, oysters are linked with wealthy love and coupled with champagne bubbles, cocktail dresses, and caviar.

But putting all that talk of romantic love aside will expose a different kind of love – the love a shellfisherman has for his work. From the seed to the supper table, an oyster farmer must immerse himself in the cultivation of these mythical mollusks. This is something "that the wives don't like too much," according to Skip Bennett of Island Creek Oysters.

Just like any other farmer, Mother Nature determines an oyster farmer's day. And Mother Nature, as this year's red tide has shown, is not always accommodating.

"It's different every day," shouted Bill Bennett over the bay wind and the motor of his skiff. Bennett spent Friday morning on the water, putting bags of undersized oysters back in the water to grow, checking on small oysters in crates, and harvesting a few bucketsful to take back to the shop and sift through.

Although shellfishing is a summer recreation for many Duxbury residents, for commercial shellfishermen, the harvesting doesn't stop when the snow starts to fall.

"This past winter, we were out there cutting through the ice with chainsaws," said Bennett. But that is just what shellfishermen enjoy.

Considered by many as both a hobby and a career, oyster harvesting "is an indus-



THE SHELL GAME

DUXBURY SHELLFISHING FACTS

- There are a total of 19,082 acres of shellfish growing areas within Duxbury.
- In Duxbury Bay alone, 3,950 acres are available for growing.
- At Duxbury Beach, there are 11,751 acres of growing areas.
- In 2002, ten licenses were granted. That's the highest number of aquaculture licenses granted per year within the past five years.
- This year, five licenses have been granted with a total of 15 growing acres.

—Courtesy of the Harbormaster
Coastal Natural Resources

try that brings the young people around," said Bennett. "It's an opportunity other than college or the rat race."

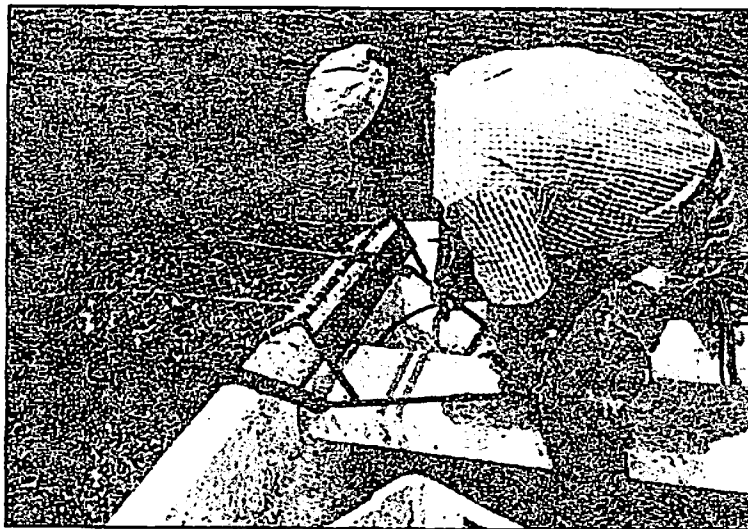
Holding up an oyster, Bill Bennett ran his finger around the sharp outer edge. "The shell grows out this way first," he said. "Then the oyster will grow." The growing organism

forces the dome, or the cup, to rise.

"When oysters are seed, they look like dust, like pepper flakes," said Bennett. As they grow, their calcium shells form around them. Oysters, like other filter-feeding shellfish, get their nutrients from the algae in the water. Oysters will eat all that they can, so to speed up the growing process, farmers will force feed them by placing them in areas of high nutrient content, said Skip Bennett.

Once they reach their desired size, they're shipped off to restaurants across the United States. Bennett remembers eating his own oysters once in a restaurant in New York.

"The restaurant had a six-month waiting list, but we got in," he said. "But we didn't get a break on the food. It cost me over \$1,000 for dinner."



Bennett hauls up grown oysters from the bottom of the bay, which he will sort through back at the shop.